

The Dismissal of Archbishop Alexander Burnet, 1669

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In a biographical article on Alexander Burnet published some years ago¹ the Rev Dr J. A. Lamb concluded that Burnet was dismissed from office because of the breach with Lauderdale which followed his opposition to the Act of Supremacy, and on that basis made his estimation of Burnet as "one who loved both king and church [but who] was not blind to the dangers that the king's claims offered to the church".² However, a re-examination of the reasons for Burnet's dismissal suggests a different estimate. It can be argued that Burnet's opposition was not to the king's influence but to that of the Scottish nobility and that, far from seeking a limitation of royal influence in the church, he sought to increase it.

Dr Lamb's article gives details of Burnet's early life, about which, however, one point might usefully be borne in mind: Burnet had been out of Scotland and out of touch with Scottish life for 24 years by the time he became bishop of Aberdeen and his experience in those years had been of royal and episcopal affairs. It was therefore extremely improbable that he would be sensitive or sympathetic to the developments that had taken place in Scottish church life or that he would have any very profound understanding of the sequence of events which had led to the Covenanting protest against the Restoration settlement of church affairs, a protest already aroused by the time Burnet was appointed to Aberdeen. His ideal in that position and as Archbishop of Glasgow was to carry out the legislation which had been designed to establish an erastian and episcopal church settlement in Scotland, and this he attempted to do without reference to the events of the preceding 20 years.

What will be considered in this paper is the process by which Burnet, in attempting to carry out this ideal, was transformed from an enthusiastic supporter of Lauderdale³ and friend of the Scottish nobility into an opponent of all that the control of the nobility over the administration in Scotland stood for, and how that transformation, rather than opposition to any single act, brought about his downfall.

It can at the outset be noted that there is one excellent reason for thinking that Burnet's dismissal was not based on his opposition to the Act of Supremacy — and that is chronology. The

¹ Rev J. A. Lamb, "Archbishop Alexander Burnet, 1614-1684", *RSCHS*, xi, 1951-3, 133-48.

² *Ibid.*, 148.

³ See the early letters to Lauderdale in NLS ms. 2512.

proximate reason why Burnet's activities came to the attention of Lauderdale and the king was the Glasgow Remonstrance, drawn up by members of the Glasgow Diocesan Synod, apparently with Burnet's approval. This document dates from September 1669⁴, whereas the Act of Supremacy is dated 16th November 1669.⁵ There had already therefore been a serious rupture in relations between Burnet and Lauderdale⁶ before the Act of Supremacy was promulgated. If Burnet's dismissal had much to do with any particular edict it was the Indulgence of July 1669, to which, as Lamb points out, the Remonstrance was an answer.

One of the longer-term factors for Burnet's dismissal was his own personality. He seems to have been a man naturally prone to see matters in their worst possible light. Before he had anything to do with Scottish affairs he was lamenting the grievous state of "this troubled and tottering church"⁷ in England. From the time when he began writing to Lauderdale about church affairs early in 1664 his letters form a constant stream of dire warnings and prophecies of forthcoming chaos and rebellion in Scotland.⁸ Tweeddale noted in July 1668 that Burnet "writtis still most whining discontent letters".⁹ Now, although Lauderdale's function as Secretary of State for Scotland was to keep the king informed of developments in Scotland, it was clearly in his interest to represent Scottish affairs in the most favourable possible light. He was unlikely therefore to have appreciated a correspondence which consistently represented Scottish affairs as being in a state of utter dislocation, particularly when Burnet seems to have been quite incapable of discrimination between degrees of unrest and disturbance, and guilty of what might be called spreading alarm and despondency: "and treuth is" as Tweeddale said, "the Arch Bishop of Glasgow and his clergy, ther grumblings and open professing ther groundles fears and apprehensions doe rais thes peopel mor then all is doun; for that is the ground of ther fanatike propheccys, the fear of ther enemys".¹⁰

However, Lauderdale could be relied upon to suppress inconvenient evidence sent to him.¹¹ He had much less control over Burnet's extremely outspoken and equally doom-and-gloom-filled correspondence with Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury. Burnet

⁴ It is reprinted in *Lauderdale Papers*, ed. O. Airy, 3 vols (London: Camden Soc., 1884-5), II, lxiv-lxvii.

⁵ *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, VII, 554.

⁶ *Lauderdale Papers*, II, 141.

⁷ From a letter in the Kent County Archives, of 17th December 1660, ref. U350 C2/110.

⁸ Of 24 letters to Lauderdale between 1664 and 1667 when the correspondence stops until 1672, 14 contain complaints, fears and apprehensions about church affairs.

⁹ *Lauderdale Papers*, II, 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 195.

¹¹ See for example Burnet's complaints that his letters meet with no response, *ibid.*, II, xvi.

seems to have written to Sheldon, not only because he felt he was sympathetic to the bishops' dilemma in Scotland,¹² but also because Sheldon had contact and influence with the king and those in power.¹³ Although the correspondence was private it is clear that the contents of the letters were known to Lauderdale and others, both because the letters were opened by others¹⁴ and because Sheldon was frequently asked to be the advocate for the Scottish bishops with the king. It may be supposed that Lauderdale would be far from enthusiastic about consistently unfavourable reports on Scotland being made through a channel other than himself. Furthermore Burnet did not confine himself to generalised lamentations about the state of affairs: he was particularly concerned to point out the inadequacy, lack of zeal for the king's service and self-interest of the Scottish nobility,¹⁵ the anti-monarchism of the disaffected, and in particular their refusal to take the Oath of Allegiance;¹⁶ the poor security against attack or rebellion in Scotland;¹⁷ the necessity to dispose of the fines in some regulated and useful way¹⁸ and the recurrence of rumours that the bishops were to be removed.¹⁹ Each one of these issues was sensitive and, without careful management, capable of discrediting Lauderdale and the entire Scottish administration.

Moreover it is certain that Lauderdale was disturbed not only by the unwelcome contents of Burnet's letters, inspired as they perhaps were by an over-anxious estimate of the situation, but also by Burnet's determination that the information should reach the king, and that determination must be ascribed to his trust in Charles II. As early as 1665 it had become apparent to Burnet that all information concerning Scotland was vetted by a small clique among the Scottish nobility. He wrote to Sheldon, "Your Grace seeth that by Launderdaill and Sir Robert Murray and their Emissaries all scots affaires are managed here, and their correspondents in Scotland are Argyle, Tweeddale, Kincairne, Crawford, etc., and if they can draw in My lord Commissioner . . . I am confident not a person in Scotland will have the confidence to contradict or oppose them."²⁰ He had therefore become determined that the king should know the true state of affairs in Scotland and was willing to brave personal unpopularity and perhaps danger to see that the king did know. Burnet was a

¹² *Lauderdale Papers*, II, viii, xi, xxiii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, iii, iv, xiii, xv, xvii, xix, xxii, xxix, xxxv, lxix-lxi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, xiii, xvii, xxviii, xlivi, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, xi, xxii, xxxi, xxxiv, xxxv and n., xxxvi, xli, xlivi, xlivi, xlvi, lviii. NLS ms 2512, f. 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 8-9, iv, xi, xxx, xlivi. NLS ms 2512, ff. 33-34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II, xii, xviii, xxviii, xxxi, xxxii, xxxvi, xxxvii, xli, xlivi, xlvi. NLS ms 2512, ff. 42-43, 66-67, 102-3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, ix, xxviii, xxxii. NLS ms 2512, ff. 31-32, 50-51, 56-57, 60-61, 87-88, 102-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 51, 90, viii, xxvii, xliv, xlvi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II, xxvii.

man who prided himself on his reputation and his integrity, so it was typical of him to say, "threatened folks live long, and if I suffer for anything I have said or done I hope I shall suffer as a Christian, and am confident it will be both my honour and advantage".²¹ These attempts to ensure that the king was informed of course implied that Burnet was confident that the king would wish to know what Burnet had to tell him. On the occasion of his interviews with the king these expectations seem to have been fulfilled: "his Majestie called me in to his bed-chamber, where he kept me halfe ane houre, and allowed me that freedome which I could not so well use before witnesses,"²² and Burnet was given a number of instructions to take back with him to be put into force in Scotland.²³ It was not long however before he discovered that the instructions he brought from the king were no more heeded than the legislation passed by Parliament. Those whose job it was to put the law into force ignored the latest orders as they had ignored what had gone before, justifying Burnet's earlier comment, "we make our laws severe and strict, but punish few or none for transgressing of them".²⁴

The solution Burnet found to this problem was to draw up a public letter to the king representing his feelings about the state of the Church in Scotland and asking for the royal intervention. The first attempt he made was in September 1667, when, at a meeting of the bishops called at his insistence to discuss the state of the church, he "moved that our opinion might be freely represented to your Grace [Sheldon] and your advice craved for preventing the dangers which wee have too just cause to feare".²⁵ This motion was successfully defeated by Sharp when Burnet was prohibited from using "the same freedome with your Grace in the publike which I doe in my owne private letters".²⁶ Instead a very moderately expressed letter was sent to Lauderdale by Sharp, and of course came to nothing.²⁷ At the second attempt in October 1668, reported by Tweeddale to Lauderdale, a petition was to be drawn up by members of a synod held by Burnet at Peebles "to represent the grievances of the church through the increase of popery and quakerism, the frequency of conventicles, and the not putting the laws in vigorous execution against disorderly persons".²⁸ This also seems to have been squashed by Sharp who had opposed by-passing the Privy Council in presenting the petition, as had been intended.²⁹ The third and successful attempt

²¹ *Lauderdale Papers*, II, 1; see also xxiv, xxv, xxvii, xliv, xlvi, lviii.

²² *Ibid.*, II, xxiv; see also xxv.

²³ *Ibid.*, II, xxvi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, xxxii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II, xl ix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 59.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 121.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 190; this account by Sharp appears to relate to the synod at Peebles although it dates from July 1669.

was the Glasgow Remonstrance of September 1669, drawn up by the Synod of Glasgow, describing the sorry state of the church and adding, "And that these our humble Resentments may come to the view of those who by their prudence and power can afford seasonable orderly, and effectual help, The Synod doth hereby supplicat the R.R. Arch Bishop, To make them knowne to the rest of the Reverend Bishops of this Church, To the lords of his Majesties most honourable privy Councell, or his Majesties high Commissioner and Court of Parliament, Or any other who may contribute their counsell or authority, for the relieve and comfort of the Church of God".³⁰

It is now time to ask what on earth Burnet can have thought he was doing in preparing these public letters, and finally presenting one. It must be remembered that the gestures he had made up to that point were all of them more or less discreet and private. Certainly his journey to court in 1665 had been on behalf of the other bishops, but his audience with the king had been more or less private, while his letters to Sheldon and Lauderdale were no more than expressions of his own opinion. In wishing to make a public statement, backed by as many as possible of his colleagues, he was therefore making it impossible to ignore what he said. If the letter was made public it could not so readily be ignored or forgotten; a reply of some sort would have to be framed. It seems indeed as if Burnet may have been attempting to put an end to the royal evasiveness. However, Burnet was an ardent royalist, a man who could say with sincerity "I am confident (by God's blessing) we may live to see his Majestie more absolute than any of his royal predecessors ever where";³¹ it therefore seems much more likely that his strategy was to make a gesture which could not be swept under the carpet by the all-pervasive influence of the Scottish nobility at court.

In retrospect it is possible to see that Charles had probably been far from straightforward in his response to Burnet, and that Burnet was extremely naive and credulous in his trust in the king. Charles was probably prepared to connive at the abuse of power by the Scottish nobility provided that they fulfilled their primary function of keeping things quiet in Scotland. He was preoccupied with the problems of England and needed to be able to rely on the control of any disturbances by his Scottish office holders. This point of view had been conveyed to them: "[The king] said that things were ill here [in England], and wee must not, said he, have troublesome business both in Scotland and here togither",³² and no doubt was part of the reason for the confidence of the Scottish nobility. When, therefore, Burnet made his public gesture not only was he putting a decisive end to the

³⁰ *Lauderdale Papers*, II, lxvii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, II, xv; see also NLS ms 2512 ff. 91-92 for a similar expression of approval for increased royal power.

³² *Ibid.*, III, 23.

system whereby Charles had been able to maintain his ignorance of abuses of power in Scotland, but also he was revealing the discontents and unrest among the Scottish people, and thereby exposing the king to the danger of trouble from his English parliament, hyper-conscious as it was of any threat to security from Scotland. Little wonder then that the king's reaction to the Glasgow Remonstrance was not, as Burnet must have expected, some further royal commands which would go some way to answering the complaints made by the Synod, but anger: "this damned paper shewes Bishops and Episcopall people are as bad on this chapter as the most arrant Presbyterian or Remonstrator".³³ Burnet in other words had meddled in matters which were not supposed to concern him, and had presumed to think that the king might welcome a subject's advice — for this, the desire to promote the royal authority, Burnet was, by a fine irony, to be "laid aside as ane uselesse and unprofitable person".³⁴

However although the Glasgow Remonstrance was merely the final expression of views which Burnet had held since 1665, it was also the opportunity for his enemies, who had conducted a long-term campaign against him. It seems clear that Burnet had always realised the legal risks he ran. In September 1665 he wrote, "there is ane expresse act of parliament declaring such persons as belie or slander the King to his subjects, or subjects to the King, guilty of treason".³⁵ His confidence had always lain in his ability to prove what he said: "I thinke they will not accuse me, for feare I prove more then I have enformed".³⁶ His enemies therefore had been obliged to try to catch him at his own game, by trying to detect him in neglect of his duties or abuse of his powers. That was the threat expressed by Tweeddale at the time of the attempted petition from the Synod of Peebles: "if this petitione come to the councel, besides what may be said to this way of petitioning, I see not how it can be awoidid to re[m]imber the failings of the clergy in ther ouen matters as in planting and visiting churchis".³⁷ Similarly a dossier of Burnet's inadequacies seems to have been in preparation.³⁸ The opportunity for his enemies came with the Glasgow Remonstrance, because that could be represented as opposition to the recently declared royal policy of greater toleration, expressed in the king's instructions of 7th June 1669.³⁹ Burnet had, however, frequently over the years expressed his opposition to leniency and had only very reluctantly been brought to put up with, if not to co-operate with, the recent

³³ *Lauderdale Papers*, II, 139.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, lxviii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, xxvii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 121.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 76; see also xxxv, xli, xlili, xlvi, l, li, lvii, lxix for other mentions of the development of opposition to Burnet.

³⁹ *RPC* III, 38-40.

policy, while declaring his loyalty: “[he] protestid he was ready to serve yow [the king] wherin he could with a good consens and justic.”⁴⁰ This was a somewhat equivocal expression of loyalty, but Burnet had made so many professions of loyalty, and had been so absolutely the king’s man during his time as archbishop, that Charles cannot have had any real doubt as to his loyalty. To bring about Burnet’s dismissal was therefore a betrayal by Charles, and the action seems to demonstrate that Burnet had indeed offended much more seriously than by the single publication of the Glasgow Remonstrance.

⁴⁰ *Lauderdale Papers*, II, 34, 52-54, 191, 196-7, 199, 1, xlvi, NLS ms 2512, f 84.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, II, 191.

